

Supervisor FRONTLINE

A newsletter from the WA State Employee Assistance Program

Questions



I recently participated in EAP supervisor training. Why is the problem affecting the employee and identified by the EAP not disclosed to the supervisor?



I have a few employees who are 15 to 20 years older than their new manager. I imagine some are trying to adjust to the reality of a boss who is young enough to be their child. I'm the department head. Should I coach them now or expect them to "deal with it"?

Answers



Knowledge of the employee's personal problem by the supervisor is not needed to manage performance, quality of work, attendance, or conduct on the job. This principle is why EAPs easily fit with personnel management models of organizations. Overarching reasons exist for not disclosing personal problems. They relate to confidentiality and perceived confidentiality of the EAP. The EAP's acceptance by the workforce depends on positive word-of-mouth promotion almost entirely related to confidentiality. This is referred to as a "program of attraction." It is a fragile dynamic easily damaged by any perception, false or otherwise, that personal problems are disclosed to management. False perceptions are easily created, but extremely difficult to tamp down which is why strict procedures that support confidentiality help businesses avoid them.



Being supervised by a younger employee can raise difficult feelings, but behavior is everything in the workplace, so monitor it. Many older workers, "bothered" by an age difference at first, readily cope in healthy ways and see the upside. Can your employees cooperate and demonstrate mutual respect? If so, view the age difference as a nonissue. For many older workers, a younger supervisor can be an exciting opportunity to learn about different ways of doing things, perhaps better, and more about technology, experiencing the wonders of more efficiency. Some older workers may see a young supervisor as a representation of what they did not accomplish, but most will adapt successfully and this awareness may never turn to conflict. If conflict occurs, address it. If it does not subside, then involve the EAP. Problems you may see could include parenting-like behaviors on the part of the older worker, insubordination, disrespectful tone, arguing, or other forms of disrespect, even bullying.

Frontline Supervisor

Questions



When organizational crisis exists, what can supervisors do to take charge and influence a large group of employees to remain calm and in control? I've had this experience a couple of times, and frankly I've felt caught off guard and not sure where to start or how to take charge.



What is the best way for me to increase my level of cultural sensitivity in the workplace, and what is the best argument for doing so?



I know supervisors are supposed to inspire employees, but this must mean more than giving a rousing speech or walking around catching employees doing something correct, right?

Answers



When an organizational crisis (large cutbacks, merger, or great loss) suddenly occurs, supervisors must demonstrate leadership. Confusion can reign, rumors can fly, and your work unit could appear on the edge of dysfunction. The need to demonstrate leadership can be scary. Insecurity can lead a manager to defer to someone else—for example, an assistant supervisor, “right-hand man,” or an employee with some perceived leadership ability. Avoid this temptation. Instead, grab the reins. Gather employees in a room and use a circle-type seating arrangement. Keep your cool, because during a crisis, employees take cues on how to respond from those in charge. Clarify the problem, update the status, and communicate a goal, objective, or response to the crisis. Next, discuss with each person, using direct eye contact, what he or she is going to do or what role he or she will play in the solution or in achieving the goal. Open a discussion about how the EAP might help, and gauge support for its role.



The best argument for increasing one's level of cultural sensitivity is to improve engagement of workers and their job satisfaction. The Gallup polling organization has maintained a rolling seven-day average of this index since first reporting on it several years ago. It stood at only 31% recently for workers in general, but if you add discrimination and lack of cultural sensitivity to the mix of reasons normally cited, this problem is compounded. Improving cultural sensitivity is a professional responsibility, although larger organizations with training and education budgets can go about the task with more ease. To enhance your cultural competence (also referred to as cultural intelligence or “CQ,”) consider books such as David Livermore's *The Cultural Intelligence Difference*.



Right! Inspiring employees is a supervisory function, but contrary to popular belief it is not just about giving a speech, praising an employee, or acting optimistic. Inspiring people is about creating an urge for them to do something, especially something creative. The best way to do this is by modeling behavior that inspires. Consider which would inspire you more: Listening to a motivational speaker give a speech or watching them perform what they preach all day? It would be the latter, of course. So, to inspire employees, consider modeling the following behaviors along with the attitudes that accompany them: passion for work, commitment, effort, integrity, teamwork, good communication, and vision. Show these positive behaviors consistently and you will be an inspiring leader.